Jerome Loving, *Walt Wlzitman: The Song of Himself*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 568 pp., 50 black-and-white photos, 7 line drawings, ISBN 0-520-21427-7, £24.95 cloth.

Hemingway once said that 'It is always a mistake to know an author too well' – the implication being that knowing the fallibilities of the writer can distract from an appreciation of the artistic achievement. This is not the case with Whitman. Jerome Loving's carefully constructed life of Whitman (like previous Whitman biographies) shows a man who deservedly won the affection of nearly all who met him.

The Preface (xii) to Loving's work says there have been approximately fifteen formal biographies of Whitman since 1883. The Standard biography has to date been Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer* (1955), and although three important biographies have appeared since then [Justin Kaplan (1980), Paul Zweig (1984) and David Reynolds (1995)], 'none of them goes significantly beyond ... *The Solitary Singer*.' Loving's book draws upon recently unearthed archival evidence and newspaper writings and clearly follows the path of his 'early mentor,' Allen, in his painstaking historical/literary scholarship. One difference, however, is that whereas Allen took a strictly chronological approach, Loving begins in 1862 with Whitman's journey to war-torn Virginia in search of his wounded brother, George. For Loving, the Civil War years are crucial for Whitman, 'a marriage ceremony ... between him and his country' (2), and this is certainly backed up by Whitman's own comments. Whitman considered the three years tending the sick and wounded in military hospitals in Washington, DC, to be the most profound lesson of his life, and in a post-Civil War line in *Leaves of Grass* he wrote 'My book and the war are one.' Whitman had written about empathy, death, suffering, the unity of the body and the soul and the individual and the nation in the first 'Song of Myself' in 1855, but his personal experience of war enlarged and clarified his intuitive sympathies.

All biographers of Whitman must deal with the nature of his homosexuality, primarily because it can affect one's reading of his work, in particular the 'Calamus' poems, which are generally seen as homoerotic. Allen thought Whitman 'strongly homoerotic,' Kaplan considered Whitman's 'Live Oak, with Moss' poems 'a recognition of his homosexuality at least as desire if not fulfilment,' and Whitman scholar Betsy Erkkila called the 'Calamus' poems 'one of the most tender and moving accounts of homosexual love in Western literature.' Loving is unique among recent biographers and critics in questioning whether Whitman had homosexual tendencies. Loving argues for a historically contextualized view of male-male relationships. In the nineteenth century men could kiss or even share the same bed without being thought homosexual, and, significantly, among nineteenth-century critics only Rufus Griswold found *Leaves of Grass* objectionable on grounds of its unconventional sexuality, though there was a chorus of disapproval for the (heterosexual) sexual content of Whitman's work otherwise. Loving thus sees the nineteenth century as an age of innocence concerning 'deviance,' and points out that the word 'homosexual' did not come into the English language until 1892. There seems little doubt, however, that Whitman was homosexual, though possibly not actively, and even Loving comments on the highly-charged first meeting of the eighteen-year-old Peter Doyle and the forty-six-year-old poet in the following fashion: 'Even if we take into

consideration the differences between conventional male relationships today and those of more than a century ago, something unusual was going on here' (298). Peter Doyle is the great love of Whitman's life, but this affection for younger, sometimes semi-illiterate, working men (the 'roughs' he allied himself with in 'Song of Myself') follows a pattern that repeated itself throughout Whitman's life – from his attachment to soldiers in the military hospitals, through to his ease and badinage with stage drivers and ferry boat workers in Manhattan and Brooklyn, right up to his old age when the young Harry Stafford, a New Jersey farm boy, replaced the absent Doyle as dear friend and substitute son.

One of Loving's strengths is his sense of historical background. He sets Whitman within his times, and carefully distinguishes between Whitman the man and the mythic creation of 'Walt Whitman, a kosmos' that we find in 'Song of Myself.' Whitman the man could write journalism 'with a casual racism' (355), and was a supporter (like Lincoln and most of the North) of the cause of Union rather than being an abolitionist during the Civil War. In his poetic persona of the cosmic Walt, however, the poet embraced all, entering into the identity of man, woman or 'hounded slave.' He was the great Romantic poet of American Democracy more in his poetry than in his day to day opinions – Whitman, for example, opposed extending slavery into the new territories, not because of emancipatory principles but because it would undercut the wages of *wlzite* workers, a group he could more readily identify with. In some ways he was a barometer of the opinion of the average American. He strongly supported the notion of Manifest Destiny, the Mexican War and the expansion Westward. There is a benign marriage between white trapper and Indian bride in section 10 of 'Song of Myself,' but the plight of the Indian did not really concern him, and he wrote a conventional poem heroizing Custer and his Last Stand. Over the years Whitman took on the role of unofficial poet laureate, responding in poems to the events of the day: Lincoln's assassination, Grant's death, the Johnstown flood. and so on. With the exception of 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,' these occasional poems are not among Whitman's best, but for the biographer they can show how poetry can serve as a historical document.

Loving is one of the foremost Whitman scholar's writing today, and has also written on other key figures in the American Renaissance. Not surprisingly, therefore, he is particularly strong on the relationship between Emerson and Whitman. Emerson's initial support for *Leaves* of *Grass,* Whitman's reckless blazoning of Emerson's letter of praise, and Emerson's gradual distancing himself from Whitman have already been thoroughly handled by others, but Loving usefully points out the differences that separated Emerson and Whitman from the very beginning. Initially, they were made for each other – Whitman was the transcendental, self-reliant poet he had been waiting for, and for Whitman Emerson was a passport to nationwide recognition as *tlze* American poet. Differences arose, however, not only about sexual explicitness (Emerson urged caution), but also about the role of nature and man (Whitman felt Emerson thought of nature as a symbol rather than a real entity 'with warts as well as wonders' [395]).

Loving's work is a magnum opus that should become the standard biography for some time to come. It is obviously a labour of love and is as carefully documented and considered as any biography can be. However, quite a lot of the material inevitably repeats what has been written by other scholars, and the number of new biographical findings are

very few. The myths of Whitman's life, some of which – like his six imaginary children – he perpetuated himself. are already well known. All biographers report that Whitman's three months in New Orleans in 1848 are crucial to his emotional and artistic development, but whether this is on account of a love affair or not simply cannot be known, and it is to be hoped that Loving's work will put a stop to further speculation on the subject. Loving is the first biographer I am aware of who suggests that 'Ellen Eyre,' the writer of a seductive love letter to Whitman, is Ada Clare, a famous Charleston beauty and 'the Queen of Bohemia' at the literary gatherings in Pfaff's beer cellar. But even here, Loving, careful biographer that he is, can only say that Clare is 'a reasonable guess' (260) for the author of the letter. Reading Loving's account of Whitman's meeting with Oscar Wilde in 1882 I was acutely aware that I had read virtually the same account in Allen's biography, right down to Wilde's comment on Whitman's dubious elderberry wine: 'If it had been vinegar I should have drunk it all the same.' Loving's account of Whitman's life is the most scrupulously researched of the biographies to date, but it is not the most readable (which for me is Kaplan's). Loving seems to wish to pack each sentence with as much information as possible, and the following is not untypical of his no-stone-unturned style:

> He told Jeff, who had just helped his mother and wife move into the latest Whitman family quarters, at Portland Street near Myrtle Avenue (the spot today absorbed by the thirty-eight-acre 'Walt Whitman' low-income housing project), that he had had 'a very fair time' in Boston, finding its citizens 'friendly' and 'generous.' (240)

However, what does emerge from Loving's biography, as with former biographies, is a renewed sense of the integrity of Whitman and of his central importance to twentieth-century poetry. A tireless self-publicist (offering glowing newspaper reviews of his own work, for example), he persisted, despite mockery and abuse from critics and the general public, in his conscious life-long task of writing a 'New Bible' for the American people. namely *Leaves of Grass*. The standard of the day was rhymed verse, the genteel primitivism of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* being the popular favourite, but as Pound wrote it was Whitman's free verse which 'broke the new wood,' redefining the criteria for what we understand as poetry. A minority of readers responded to Whitman's work in his lifetime – interestingly feminists were among his strongest supporters – whereas today his influence seems immense.

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